

János Kárpáti (1932–2021)

Lóránt PÉTERI*

OBITUARY

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“In Kárpáti’s article, Bartók and Schoenberg appear as equals. This cannot constitute the program of the journal; the editorial team cannot allow such articles to be published.” In 1964, the erudite editors of the periodical *Magyar Zene* were called to account with these words by composer Ferenc Szabó, the director of the Liszt Academy of Music (Budapest) and, as such, the superior of János Kárpáti, who was back then the thirty-two-year-old head of the Academy’s library. Of course, Kárpáti’s series of studies “Bartók and Schoenberg” did not equate the two composers. On the other hand, Kárpáti, the music historian who had previously written a monograph on Schoenberg, examined Schoenberg’s influence on Bartók and interpreted Bartók’s music in the context of European modernism; with other words, he opposed the quasi-official Bartók image that had emerged around 1955 in Hungary. The series of studies in question was in fact a preliminary version of the forthcoming volume *Bartók Béla vonósnégyesei* (1967, English translation as *Bartók’s String Quartets*, 1975). Kárpáti’s exploration of the fine structures in Bartók’s music was later published in a new version, complemented with further analyses, entitled *Bartók kamarazenéje* (1976); its updated version in English was brought out by Pendragon Press as *Bartók’s Chamber Music* (1994) and soon became a classic of the international literature on Bartók.

János Kárpáti began his studies at the Liszt Academy of Music in 1951 as a student of the very first year of Hungarian musicology training, initiated at that time. As a member of the young generation experiencing historical cataclysms, and at the same time fully aware of the opportunities and responsibilities of the “firsts,” he contributed with extraordinary energy and in several different fields to Hungarian musicology and the professional musical discourse of the last six to seven decades. Under his direction, the collection of the Academy of Music grew into the most important music library in Central Europe, and Kárpáti himself became a leading figure in the international community of music librarians. He wrote a book about Domenico Scarlatti, presented Beethoven’s quartets in the prestigious Budapest radio series supplemented by printed volumes, *A hét zeneműve* (The musical work of the week), and followed the developments of contemporary music in analytical critiques. He turned with particular affinity and a sense of spiritual brotherhood to the music of András Szöllősy, whom he considered, in addition to Ligeti and Kurtág, the “third master” of post-war Hungarian music, and about whom he authored or edited a number of volumes.

* Corresponding author. E-mail: peteri.lorant@zeneakademia.hu

It was in the wake of Bartók's collections of Arabic music and due to the inspiration of his master, Bence Szabolcsi, that Kárpáti focused his attention on the traditional musical cultures of the Middle East, and later of the Far East, as well as their influence on Western music. He conducted on-site collections in Morocco and Japan. The first edition of his summary *Kelet zenéje* (Music of the Orient) became in 1981 one of the top achievements of music-themed typographic art in Hungary, given that its richness of content is accompanied by an extremely fastidious execution. Later, he concentrated his efforts more and more on Japanese music, establishing excellent professional relations with representatives of the musicology of the island country – he chose this subject matter for his higher doctoral (DSc) doctoral dissertation *Zene és mítosz a Japán rituális hagyományban* (Music and myth in Japanese ritual tradition), which he defended in 1996.

As a professor, János Kárpáti nurtured successive generations of fledgling Hungarian musicologists trying their wings. Also, Kárpáti was the second president of the Hungarian Musicological Society, the autonomous professional organization of scholars and music critics established in 1993, in the wake of the democratic transition, and he held this position for a decade. The Hungarian musicological community lost an author who became a classic in his lifetime and who was a great reader as well: our studies could count on János Kárpáti's sharp attention, sincere interest, and apt comments.

Our conferences have lacked, for some time now, his passionate and rigorous interventions, his smiling remarks. His wisdom and persistent, reserved love for music was shown by the fact that in his late years, plagued by disease, he surrounded himself with the musical testimonies and written memories of the Mozartian miracle. Continuing and completing the work of his former classmate, János Kovács, he published a six-hundred-page, richly annotated selection of Mozart's correspondence and related documents in Hungarian (2017). And last fall, his magnificent study of Mozart's marches was published in the pages of this very journal: *Ecco la marcia, andiamo...*

(translated by István Csaba NÉMETH)

